



July 30, 2006

## Off the Beaten Path

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#)

IF you live and die by status, if the name [Harvard](#), [Yale](#), Stanford or Penn must hang etched in sheepskin on your wall, then read no further. There is nothing we can do for you here. The demographic bulge of college-age students has made the journey to a top-tier campus the most arduous, angst-ridden an 18-year-old can make.

“If you decide that there’s only one place to go to college and it’s Harvard, you are setting yourself up for rejection,” says Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

There are more than 2,500 four-year colleges and universities in the United States — an educational landscape unmatched anywhere in the world — yet only 25 or so of the usual suspects end up on high school seniors’ lists. Higher education experts have this message for those squabbling over a handful of spots: you’re probably not going to room with the next president anyway. Pay less attention to prestige and more to “fit” — the marriage of interests and comfort level with factors like campus size, access to professors, instruction philosophy. In their caliber of undergraduate teaching, many lesser-known campuses, in their opinion, are on equal or near-equal footing with brand-name universities, and in some ways are more three-dimensional.

“My view is that there is a very modest to zero correlation between general academic prestige and the quality of undergraduate experience available to students,” says Lee S. Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. “Those seeking hidden gems are very wise, especially if they are committed to coming to a campus and becoming very active students, taking advantage of faculty office hours, undergrad research experiences and the like.”

Colleges, too, want a more prominent seat at the national admissions table, and have been building up campuses, luring new faculty members and trying to raise academic standards.

“The difference in faculty quality between institutions is much smaller than ever,” Mr. Shulman says, “and the opportunities for students in smaller, less prestigious institutions has never been greater.”

Mr. Nassirian agrees: “There are numerous institutions that may not be household names or have the resonance of the Ivies but offer superb and sometimes better undergraduate experiences. But people are mesmerized with

the usual suspects.”

Even the notion that a prestige degree unlocks doors and leads to higher earnings has been challenged. A 1999 study by Alan B. Krueger of [Princeton](#) and Stacy Dale of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation found that students who were admitted to both selective and moderately selective colleges earned the same no matter which they attended. The study suggested that the motivation and drive of the student mattered more than the college.

As parents and counselors clamor for relief from the high-stakes admissions battles, a handful of guides have thrown the spotlight on lesser-known colleges. “Far too often the conversation is about the inability to get in anywhere,” says Martha McConnell, an editor of “Colleges That Change Lives,” a 1996 book by Loren Pope profiling 40 oft-overlooked but worthy campuses. The concept of “hidden gems” has gained so much currency that the 40 have formed the C.T.C.L. coalition and promote themselves as a unit at college fairs. But, Ms. McConnell says, the Ivies -or-bust mentality is “a shame that tends to still be the way we think.”

Of course, whether a campus is known or not depends on vantage point. The Claremont Colleges, a consortium of seven institutions near Los Angeles, have long drawn the admiration of cognoscenti west of the Mississippi; two of the colleges, Pomona and Claremont McKenna, are now among the nation’s most elite. Who outside of California can name the other five? Likewise, Grinnell and Carleton are selective institutions that are no secret to academic pundits, rankings-makers and high-achieving Midwesterners.

But stealth powerhouses outside the Northeast “simply don’t have the brand names,” says David W. Breneman, dean of the Curry School of Education at the [University of Virginia](#) and an expert on the economics of private colleges. Many “simply don’t have the application pressure that the Eastern schools have.” So the Midwest is dotted with liberal arts opportunities. The West, in its relative youth, lacks the East’s private school tradition but has a strong public presence.

The following colleges, compiled with help from a dozen higher education experts and counselors, stress undergraduate teaching, have established or rising scholarship, even if they come up short on standardized test scores, and are alternatives to the usual suspects. They’re not a good fit for everyone, and represent just a small sample of America’s riches. There are only so many miles a family can cover on campus visits. But from Ann Arbor, it’s an hour and a half to Kalamazoo; from Berkeley to Oakland, 15 minutes.

Golden State

PITZER COLLEGE Claremont, Calif.

Undergraduates: 963

Acceptance rate: 40 percent

Pitzer was founded in 1963 as a women's college and, now coed, embraces its roots in that progressive decade: students enjoy broad academic freedom, and can build their own programs and partake in independent study. Pitzer is a member of the Claremont consortium — Scripps (all women), Harvey Mudd (math and sciences), two graduate schools (Keck and Claremont) and, of course, Pomona and Claremont McKenna. Consortium students are encouraged to take classes at member colleges, expanding resources and exposing them to a variety of high-powered professors. Campuses adjoin, with most buildings just a 15- to 20-minute walk away. Pitzer has a reputation for a more relaxed environment than the other colleges; some say that's because classes are easier; others say students are not as type A. SAT's are optional, too. Citing a cultural bias to the exam and a desire to improve its ethnic mix, Pitzer waives scores for high-performing students.

SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY Santa Clara, Calif.

Undergraduates: 4,638

Acceptance rate: 61 percent

Founded by the Jesuits in 1851, Santa Clara is California's oldest institution of higher learning. It has long been in the shadow of fellow Silicon Valley titans, Stanford and Berkeley. But "the Georgetown of the West Coast" has highly regarded business and engineering programs. Could Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco, Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona and Jerry Brown, mayor of Oakland and former governor, all be wrong? They are some of the notable alumni.

MILLS COLLEGE Oakland, Calif.

Undergraduates: 881

Acceptance rate: 83 percent

Mills boasts about a lot of firsts: the first bachelor's degrees in the West awarded to women, the first women's college to offer a computer science major. Its Center for Contemporary Music is recognized for advancing electronic music. Mills has been expanding its enrollment over the last two years as well as its academics, particularly in professional training; new programs include nursing administration, biopsychology and Latin American studies. The campus sits across the bay from San Francisco, and Oakland has plenty of treasures in its own right. The location also ensures a cross-section of students. Small liberal arts colleges talk a lot about diversity but struggle to broaden their net. At Mills, a third of undergraduates are from minority groups, more than 80 percent get financial aid and almost a quarter are over age 23. The graduate school is coed, improving the gender mix as well.

Pacific Northwest

## SOUTHERN OREGON UNIVERSITY

Ashland

Undergraduates: 4,438

Acceptance rate: 85 percent

The Tony Award-winning Oregon [Shakespeare](#) Festival in Ashland was started in 1935 by a teacher at this public university. The campus and festival are retain strong ties. Students in the theater arts program serve internships with the festival; festival staff members assist in student productions, and guest artists lecture. “The university has an exceptional English and liberal arts curriculum best known for Shakespeare,” says David Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Students can minor in Shakespeare studies, which bridges academic study and performance. The summer program in teacher theater training draws educators from around the country. Ashland is hundreds of miles from a big city, but the festival and university seem to thrive thanks to mountainous surroundings that attract tourists and faculty.

EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE Olympia, Wash.

Undergraduates: 4,191

Acceptance rate: 97 percent

With its hippie vibe, Evergreen is one of the country’s more unusual public colleges. Since its founding in 1971 — think of the time — Evergreen has sought to throw out the rules, including the class schedule. Students don’t quite make it up as they go along, but that’s the idea. A seminar here, a workshop there, a field trip, a collaborative lab. “The college has retained its innovative, iconoclastic spirit, remaining true to its founding principles, holding fast to a belief that faculty and students are both learners,” says George D. Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at [Indiana University](#) Bloomington and of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Evergreen was one of 20 colleges he and his co-authors featured in a 2005 book, “Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter.”

WHITMAN COLLEGE Walla Walla, Wash.

Undergraduates: 1,512

Acceptance rate: 47 percent

Here is a college for the outdoors type — mountains and streams are readily accessible. The city is small enough that it is not unusual to bump into a professor at the coffee shop, and Whitman promises that they won’t mind

chatting outside of class time (or in class, with an average of just 15 students). “If you are in the Northwest, people would almost always tell you it is a premiere institution,” says Mr. Longanecker. Every semester, the college finances trips to campus for 100 minority and low-income high school students, some of whom are offered full-ride scholarships.

#### Cowboy Country

##### COLORADO COLLEGE Colorado Springs

Undergraduates: 1,977

Acceptance rate: 38 percent

Students get through Colorado College a course at a time — literally. One course is taken for three and a half weeks, followed by a four-day break, and then it’s on to the next. But the anthropology classroom may well be nearby Anasazi ruins, the geology classroom the Grand Canyon. The college takes advantage of its stunning Rocky Mountain setting, with day and weeklong field trips. To build community, students, most of whom come from outside Colorado, are required to live on campus for the first three years. Perhaps inspired by the college president, Richard F. Celeste, a former [Peace Corps](#) director, 20 alumni are currently serving in the corps. Famous graduates include the vice president’s wife, [Lynne Cheney](#), and their daughters, Elizabeth and Mary.

##### [UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA](#) Norman

Undergraduates: 21,270

Acceptance rate: 82 percent

Oklahoma’s rising academic profile is reflected in statistics: No. 1 per capita among public universities in the number of National Merit Scholars enrolled (currently 700) and in the top five in the graduation of Rhodes Scholars. This is a sprawling university, with commensurate academic resources and heterogeneity: about a quarter of undergraduates are minorities (8 percent American Indian) and on Pell grants. Deep in the heartland, Oklahoma has its own natural history museum, a renowned collection of Impressionist paintings, and 20 colleges offering 153 undergraduate majors. We hear the football team is not so bad, either.

#### Northern Plains

##### MACALESTER COLLEGE St. Paul

Undergraduates: 1,867

Acceptance rate: 39 percent

[Kofi Annan](#), the [United Nations](#) secretary general, is an alumnus. That should not be surprising. Twelve percent of enrollment — a lot for a campus of this size — are international students representing 78 countries. Mr. Annan, a native of Ghana who graduated in 1961, returned to the campus this spring to dedicate its Institute for Global Citizenship, devoted to addressing world problems. In keeping with its pan-cultural emphasis, the college offers an array of study-abroad programs and field trips within the United States. As for its own location, it has pros (near world-class museums as well as muskie fishing) and cons (fearfully frigid winters).

CARLETON COLLEGE Northfield, Minn.

Undergraduates: 1,936

Acceptance rate: 29 percent

Carleton's Frisbee prowess may be matched only by the high number of students who go on to earn doctorates, particularly in math and science. When the winter snow finally recedes, students break out the flying discs in serious club competitions. Who said Carletonians were nerdy and cerebral? "Carleton is a place where able and intelligent students with a quirky sense of humor would go," says Mr. Longanecker of the Western Interstate Commission. Carleton's scholarship is well documented. It ranks behind only Williams, Amherst, Swarthmore and Wellesley as best liberal arts college in the country, according to U.S. News & World Report, and is equally selective.

GRINNELL COLLEGE

Grinnell, Iowa

Undergraduates: 1,546

Acceptance rate: 37 percent

Grinnell is something like the frugal farmer tucking money away under the mattress. A lot of money. It has a \$1.3 billion endowment, due largely to landing the investor [Warren E. Buffett](#) as a trustee. And it doesn't hurt that one of the founders of Intel, Robert N. Noyce, is an alumnus and that the college invested early in the company's stock. The endowment pays for half the operating budget, and a healthy bottom line means ample resources — at the moment, a major expansion of the science center, construction of a student center, and paid internships and summer research projects for students. Grinnell, 50 miles from Des Moines, has long been a favorite of Iowans searching for strong academics not too far from home, but it has recently drawn from farther afield.

[CORNELL](#) COLLEGE Mount Vernon, Iowa

Undergraduates: 1,184

Acceptance rate: 66 percent

Like at Colorado College, Cornell students take one intensive monthlong course at a time. The block plan allows them to really focus and to spend more time in the field, college officials say. Students can design their own majors, though the most popular are psychology and teacher education. Loren Pope featured Cornell in his "Colleges That Change Lives," citing the degree to which professors involve students in their research and the number of students (two-thirds) who go on to graduate or professional school. The entire campus, a mix of architectural styles on a wooded hilltop, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Lest there be any confusion with the [Ivy League](#) Cornell University, students wear T-shirts with the slogan "Isn't that in Ithaca?" Just to keep the confusion going: the two institutions' founders were distant cousins.

The Midwest

KALAMAZOO

COLLEGE

Kalamazoo, Mich.

Undergraduates: 1,234

Acceptance rate:

68 percent

About 80 percent of Kalamazoo students choose to study overseas, taking advantage of 50 programs on every continent but Antarctica. Study abroad forms part of the "K" plan, the college's term for academic and extracurricular endeavors. Internships and senior projects are emphasized. Kalamazoo has 11 students to every faculty member, almost all with Ph.D.'s.

EARLHAM COLLEGE Richmond, Ind.

Undergraduates: 1,201

Acceptance rate: 70 percent

Japanese gardens on campus reflect Earlham's ties to Japan, which go back more than 100 years. Its nationally recognized Japanese studies program has offered bachelor's degrees since 1974. A global perspective permeates

the curriculum; students must be proficient in a foreign language by graduation. Earlham also does well in the National Survey of Student Engagement, which sets benchmarks to measure student involvement. High levels of engagement may have something to do with Earlham's Quaker roots and adherence to church principles of community.

Miami University Oxford, Ohio

Undergraduates: 14,481

Acceptance rate: 70 percent

No, not that Miami — this university is named for the Indian tribe that inhabited the Midwest. “The focus is truly on educating undergraduates,” says Terry Hartle, a senior vice president at the American Council on Education. “This is a medium-size institution with the advantages that confers” — high-quality facilities, research opportunities — “but it still has the feel of a small liberal arts college.” Half the classes have fewer than 25 students. Miami's reputation among Ohioans for partying may come from the proliferation of fraternities and sororities. But its graduation rates are among the highest in public education.

KENYON COLLEGE Gambier, Ohio

Undergraduates: 1,634

Acceptance rate: 34 percent

“An excellent tradition in the humanities, creative writing and theater,” says Mr. Breneman, who was president of Kalamazoo College in the 1980's. It's “not an accident that Paul Newman is an alum,” he says. Nor E.L. Doctorow. The college puts a premium on good writing and produces the Kenyon Review, a literary magazine. The combination of creativity and academic rigor has been noted in the Ivy belt, with a third of students from the New England and Middle Atlantic states. Quaint tradition: At the beginning of the year, freshmen gather on the steps of one of its stately buildings and sing Kenyon songs. Four years later, the same students assemble again to sing before their commencement.

COLLEGE OF WOOSTER Wooster, Ohio

Undergraduates: 1,827

Acceptance rate: 75 percent

The mantra of the liberal arts college: Think hard and critically. To prove that students have developed that skill, each must complete an independent study project, with one-on-one guidance by a faculty member. This could be a

written work, performance or art exhibit. Sitting in the middle of cornfields here, distractions from studies are few — except maybe dreaming about a road trip to Cleveland nightspots.

#### The Northeast

SUNY GENESEO Geneseo, N.Y.

Undergraduates: 5,174

Acceptance rate: 41 percent

Kiplinger's Personal Finance magazine puts the [State University of New York's](#) Geneseo campus at the top of its list of "Best Values in Public Colleges" for out-of-state students, with tuition under \$12,000. Geneseo, in a historic village south of Rochester, is often overshadowed by its upstate cousin Binghamton, which has long been seen as an alternative for New Yorkers who didn't get into or chose not to go to the Ivies. But Geneseo has been "pushing the envelope on its rival," says Shereem Herndon-Brown, a private consultant who was director of college counseling at Riverdale Country School in New York. Geneseo, the most selective of SUNY's comprehensive colleges, is increasingly seen as a first choice for high achievers who cannot or won't do the financial aid dance with private colleges.

UNION COLLEGE Schenectady, N.Y.

Undergraduates: 2,150

Acceptance rate: 47 percent

That's Union as in the union of science, particularly engineering, and the humanities. Consider this year's valedictorian, Mark Weston, who majored in computer science with a minor in classics. The salutatorian, Marisa Zarchy, was a biology major with a double minor in chemistry and art. More than 150 years ago, Union was one of the big four — right up there with Harvard, Yale and Princeton — before losing ground amid a scandal over college finances. Union began a revival in the early 1900's with the addition of an electrical engineering program, tapping a relatively new technology. Three years ago, Union embarked on another experiment. Worried that Greek life was dominating campus (the country's three oldest fraternities were founded at Union), administrators created the Minerva houses, after the Roman goddess of wisdom. Students, about 300 each, and professors are assigned to one of seven houses, where they study, hold discussion groups and just hang out; upperclassmen can live in the houses. Mr. Herndon-Brown lauds the new social climate for letting Union's "academic richness" shine through.

WHEATON COLLEGE Norton, Mass.

Undergraduates: 1,550

Acceptance rate: 41 percent

With Boston's powerhouses nearby, it's easy to overlook small, solid colleges like Wheaton, which lack the cachet and cash of their urban peers. But Wheaton, which was once a women's college, is singled out as a choice for students looking for a more intimate experience. Mr. Kuh cites its seminar for new students, taught by a team of advisers made up of teachers, administrators and older students. In a program called "Connections," aimed at broadening perspectives, all students must take sets of courses on a single topic from different departments. For example, the "African Diaspora in the New World" connection entails classes from the music, history and sociology departments. Students are urged to make their own connections.

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